Castlemaine Naturalist

February 2011

Vol. 36.1 #384

Monthly newsletter of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Nodding Chocolate Lily - Photo by Noel Young

The Grey-headed Flying-fox in Castlemaine

Chris Timewell

On the evening of Sunday 7 November 2010, while putting the rubbish bin out the front of our Saint St home, a large brown dark shape flew out of a planted eucalypt from the roadside and then circled back in. After a quick dash inside to grab the binoculars and a torch, I was very excited to discover that a Grey-headed Flying-fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*), one of Victoria's three known fruit bat species, was happily consuming nectar and/or pollen from the flowers of the tree. At least two others were heard calling nearby at the same time. Subsequently while walking home from the CFNC general meeting on Friday 12 November, I heard another calling from the tall eucalypts near the corner of Saint St and Wheeler St. And, as reported at the CFNC meeting on the same night, another club member had reported seeing small numbers of Grey-headed Flying-fox (GHFF) individuals over the past 2-3 weeks near his house on the southern side of central Castlemaine. I am not aware that anyone detected where they were roosting.

There have been few previous records of this species from the Goldfields bioregion. In his book, the Wildlife of the Box-Ironbark Country, Chris Tzaros considered the GHFF to be a vagrant visitor to the region. The Atlas of Victorian Wildlife database has a single record of GHFF from the Castlemaine area in the mid-1990s.

As reported in the Bendigo Advertiser and discussed at CFNC meetings a colony of GHFF established at Rosalind Park in central Bendigo in autumn 2010, which by winter had grown to a significantly above average colony for Victoria of over 10,000. Presumably, these bats were feeding predominantly on the many flowering eucalypts in the surrounding forests. At the time of writing (early January 2011), some of the GHFF were still present in Rosalind Park. The occurrence of such large numbers of GHFF in central Victoria is an unprecedented event. Any connection between the bats seen in Castlemaine and those at Rosalind Park is unclear.

The GHFF is listed as a 'vulnerable' species under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, as a threatened species on the Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and as 'vulnerable' on the DSE advisory list of threatened vertebrate fauna in Victoria (2007). To put this in context, this indicates that the GHFF is considered to be slightly less threatened than the Swift Parrot and slightly more threatened than the Eltham Copper Butterfly. As for all of Victoria's native vertebrate fauna, it is also listed as a protected species on the *Wildlife Act 1975*. Although they may appear more common at some locations, overall the species is in decline across its distribution.

Historically, the GHFF was very uncommon in Victoria. Until the GHFF roosting and breeding site was first established at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens in the early-mid 1980s, the only known Victorian colony occurred near Mallacoota. Small numbers of GHFF were (and still are) occasionally seen elsewhere across the state during the non-breeding season. The reason(s) why GHFF have established colonies in urbanised centres over the past couple of decades is not entirely clear. However, it seems probable that major contributors to their southward migrations and establishment of new southerly colonies have been the combined effects of on-going drought, habitat loss, habitat modification and other human disturbances in their northern Australian colonial areas and feeding grounds (where they were historically most common).

GHFF are poorly portrayed in the popular press. The beneficial role of the bats in pollination of native trees is under-reported whilst their role in the decline of trees they use for roosting, their consumption of fruit from orchards and backyard trees and the risk of the spread of diseases to humans continues to be greatly exaggerated. I have recently read many increasingly angry letters to the editor of the Bendigo Advertiser demanding that GHFF be moved on from Rosalind Park. The negative publicity campaign run by Melbourne Botanic Gardens staff in recent years led to what I consider to be the unnecessary culling of many bats, and the forced movement of those remaining to a new, less suitable roost site which is likely to have resulted in many additional deaths. What is clear is that GHFF are vulnerable to human activities and that there is a very real risk of the species becoming extinct in the short-to-medium term.

Time will tell whether the GHFF seen recently in Castlemaine are temporarily passing through as rare nomads or refugees, partaking in the consumption of some fine Box-Ironbark nectar resources and facilitating pollination in return, or whether they will become a more regular visitor or resident in these parts. Either way, I welcome them as an interesting addition to the Castlemaine fauna list, and I hope that others also accept them or even embrace them as relatively benign, highly threatened and very interesting visitors to the local area. I would be keen to hear if others know of other local observations of this species.

The **SEANA Autumn Camp** will be at Anglesea
25th to 28th MARCH 2011 Hosted by ANGAIR Inc
Further information: ANGAIR Inc PO Box 12 Anglesea 3230
telephone: 03 5263 1085 email: admin@angair.com.au

Bells Swamp, and the Swamps of the Moloort Plain

Rita Mills

After meeting up with local bird enthusiast Bill Chapman, and hearing from him what fantastic bird life there was on these swamps, I knew I would have to go out to Bell's Swamp at least, so Doug and I set off on Tuesday afternoon, which of course, is not the best time for visiting swamps for birding, as the birds are usually quiet at that time, but it was still well worth the visit.

To start with I just paddled into the water on the road, moving back every time a vehicle wanted to go through. The water actually stretched from Eastville Road (impassible) to the other end of the swamp, with a dry patch of about 100 metres in the middle. After spending about half an hour at the Eastville Road end, I decided to drive through the water to the dry area as I could see a lot of birds down there, moving off the road when a vehicle came along, and then moving back onto the road, and I wanted to see better what they were. I found that there was two families of Pacific Black Ducks, one family just starting to get pin feathers, and the other still all fluff, but I was surprised how little they were fussed by our presence, even when I got out of the car.

My list for Bells Swamp - a few Wood Ducks, Pacific Black Ducks, some Grey Teal, a couple of White-necked Herons, Dusky Moorhens, Swamp Hens, Galahs, Sacred Kingfisher, Brown Treecreeper, Red-rumped Parrots, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Grey Shrike-thrush, Coots, Little and Long-Billed Corellas, Masked Lapwings, Willie Wagtails, Magpies, ravens, White-plumed Honeyeaters, Mudlarks, Hoary-headed Grebes, and Superb Blue Fairy-wrens.

When Bill was there he saw lots of Pacific (White-necked)Herons, and he said there were even more on the swamp just up on the plateau above Joyces Creek, but of course, he was there at the right time of the day. We visited that one, and the others on the Campbelltown road to Rodborough Road on Sunday afternoon, but again at the wrong time of day, but the beauty of the trees and their reflections in the water made it all worthwhile, and it was awe inspiring to see the vast areas of these swamps when they are full. There were even Great Black Cormorants soaring over the one at the end of Salagaris road.

Bill had told me that even Long Swamp had water in it, and we could see that when we got to Rodborough Road, but by that time we really didn't have time to do any more exploring. Perhaps another day?

Duck Hunting

Kit Morris

Laurie Levy is our guest speaker at the general meeting following the AGM on Friday 11 February. Laurie has fought the issue of Duck Shooting as long as many of us can remember. And with some success, judging by the fact that States other than Victoria have by now banned a Duck Hunting Season. Victoria goes further - it promotes Duck Hunting as a tourist attraction!!

It seems strange in this day and age - other than political thinking - that any Government of any persuasion would allow recreational shooting of waterbirds for fun. Not just ducks, anything that floats is fair game. Slaughtering animals for pleasure is certainly not very character building. The annual survey we have completed for this district records very low numbers, obvious when you think of all the waterbirds that would have gone north to take advantage of the breeding and feeding opportunities.

Australia Day award to Ern and Leslie Perkins

The Mt Alexander Shire conferred a Citizens' award on Ern and Leslie Perkins for their exceptional contribution to local Land care and natural history work

Photo - Denis Hurley

Ern has already acquired a number of accolades, such as an Order of Australia (2004) and the Australian Natural History Medallion (2009), but they work as a couple, and it is their joint achievements, performed in their own time and at their own cost which has been recognised in this award.

Their work is recognised locally. They are often asked to carry out vegetation surveys for private landholders and not-for-profit organizations such as Trust for Nature and the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests. Their expertise is also sought by many community members who wish to have plants identified.

Among their many activities, they monitor vegetation changes at selected sites around the Mount Alexander Shire. They have selected 100 sites where they perform detailed vegetation surveys in 20m x 20m quadrats, working with a small team of volunteers from the Castlemaine Field Naturalist's Club. Sites are re-surveyed every few years so that change can be detected. The survey procedure involves identifying the species present in the quadrats, estimating the species abundance and counting the number of individual plants for selected species. The resulting data is submitted to DSE and Parks Victoria. Long term survey data such as that collected by Lesley and Ern can be used to assess the impacts of climate change, fire and land management practices on native vegetation. Such data helps improve the management practices of these land management organizations.

Ern and Lesley were foundation members of the Castlemaine Field Naturalist's Club, formed in 1976. Ern has been a President of the Club and continues as an active member today. Among his many projects with the Club has been the production of information leaflets about local vegetation, birds and geology which are made available to tourists and visitors to the Shire. A recent, most successful, enterprise has been the production of a brochure on native plants of the area. This was done

in conjunction with CFNC, the Norman Wettenhall Foundation, Mount Alexander Shire, DSE etc. and has already sold well over 1500 through the Information Centre and other voluntary outlets.

Our congratulations go to Ern and Leslie for a well deserved recognition.

Dawn Breakfast 2011

Rita Mills

There were five takers and two apologies for the Dawn Breakfast at the Quince Tree this year, but no one actually got to the Quince Tree, as the crossing was washed out, though George managed to get across, but didn't attempt to return that way. I jibbed altogether, and if I hadn't, we wouldn't have been able to get into the area anyway as it was so wet, so we settled for the Gower School site instead. I managed an about 5 point turn and drove back to the school, and got there in time to take photos of the mist through the trees with the sun shining through it. Kit and Helen Morris were next to arrive, and Broadways soon joined us after a detour back onto the main Maldon road.

It was really quite a noisy dawn for a while - Magpies and ravens mainly! - but a couple of pairs of Wood Ducks were checking out hollows, so apparently the heavy rain had convinced them that another family was in order.

There were few birds around, probably because there is plenty of food now, but we did have the company of Galahs, Kookaburras, a Grey Shrike-thrush or two, a couple of Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes, a single Red Wattlebird and we could hear a Spotted Pardalote and a Shining Bronze-cuckoo calling briefly, as well as the Little Ravens, Magpies and Wood-ducks, of course.

After we'd had our breakfast the others decided to go home, but I stayed on for another hour, walking around the Gower School area, photographing, or trying to, spiders in their webs, reflections in puddles and the morning light through the trees, and recording Nodding Chocolate Lilies *Arthropodium fimbriatum ,* Wiry Buttons *Leptorhynchus tenuifolius* and Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* in flower.

Before I headed for home I decided to walk back to the washed out crossing near the Quince Tree, and photograph that. I thought perhaps I might manage to cross over, but decided that wasn't a very good idea as I was on my own (I've got a very fertile imagination at such times!) and decided to just walk onto the flat under the trees, but that was so soft underfoot and squelching with water, that I turned back, and spotted some beautiful little rafts of floating caps off the Red Gums in the water at the side of the road, with some blue Damsel Flies flitting round there as well.

Meanwhile I had identified the ravens, added a White-throated Treecreeper, White-plumed Honeyeaters, Eastern Rosellas, Fuscous Honeyeaters, a White-faced Heron, Welcome Swallows and a Willy Wagtail to my list of birds for the morning, so I walked back to the car, ready to go home after a very pleasant start to my day.

December picnic at Tullaroop Reservoir

Denis Hurley

On Saturday December 11th 2010 eleven members headed out through Newstead on a very windy and hot afternoon – having crossed over the wall and had a wander on green grass, a novel sight not seen for nearly a decade due to drought conditions and low water levels.

We even found a large (150mm diameter) Bread fungus (photo 1) The group then decided to move on further to the south west corner to attempt to find some shelter from the strong wind. Not many birds were seen, but two beautiful Hoary-headed Grebes were seen disappearing across the water when we put out our chairs. A short restricted walk due to high water level again yielded few birds. They were probably busy clinging on to a branch for safety. At least it blew the cobwebs away!

Observations

- December -
- Loraine Le Plastrier reported seeing two Brolgas at Mitiamo
- Denis Hurley reported that Elaine Bayes has so far found 100 caterpillars of Eltham Copper butterflies – up to 3 per bush (Bursaria spinosa) on the high point of the hill in the Botanical gardens
- Rufous Whistler at Barkers Ck – Dianne Thompson
- January -
- Kit Morris has noted a family of three Yellow tailed Black Cockatoos flying low over home. Both Noel Young and George Broadway had the same experience around that time (mid January)
- Denis noted unseasonal responses, eg his Correas flowering at present, and the dispersal of native birds
- Rita Mills found Nodding Chocolate Lilies near the Gower School
- George Broadway and Debbie Worland both noted New Holland Honeyeaters on the increase in the urban area

"The Swift Parrots of Muckleford" © DVD Launch.

The Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club together with the Norman Wettenhall Foundation and The Melliodora Fund are thrilled to announce the official launch of "The Swift Parrots of Muckleford" DVD on

Thursday February 24 at 10.30 am

at The Castlemaine Market Building

to be followed by morning tea. Chris Tzaros from Birds Australia will be launching the DVD.

This beautiful Australian parrot is on the Nationally Endangered Species List, with only 1200 breeding pairs left in the wild. The Swift Parrot breeds only in Tasmania and each year travels to the Australian mainland to feed over the winter period. One of their favorite spots is The Box Ironbark Forests of Central Victoria.

The Aim of this amazing DVD is to help anybody identify Swift Parrots by sight and by their distinctive calls. Filmed in Muckleford, Central Victoria based on footage taken over a five-year period by Debbie Worland, it shows behavior of Swift Parrots never recorded before. It features special comments from Birds Australia's Swift Parrot Recovery Co-coordinator Chris Tzaros, and has been narrated by International Award Winner, John Flaus, a resident of Castlemaine. Bill Irwin Productions of Chewton did an outstanding job on the production.

DVDs will be on sale on the day. All Landcare Groups and Schools in the Shire of Mount Alexander will be given a free copy.

You can visit the website www.swiftparrotsofmuckleforddvd.com for more details.

If you wish to come to the launch please RSVP to Beth Mellick on 54721316 or beth@nwf.org.au by February 17, as numbers are limited.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme
February 2011

Fri February 11 meeting: A.G.M. Speaker: LAURIE LEVY

Sat February 12 field trip: Bells Swamp *

*NB meet at 8.30 AM at the Duke St car park

Fri March 11 meeting: speaker: JULIAN HOLLIS on local geology

Sat March 12 field trip: to be announced

Sat March 19 activity: KABC roadside clean-up 9am at cnr Pyrenees Hwy and Golf Links Road

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.
Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.
Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Denis Hurley's; 20 Merrifield St., at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2011
Ordinary membership: Single $27, Family $35
Pensioner or student: Single $24, Family $29
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

2010 Committee

Denis Hurley (President)		5472 2753
Chris Timewell (vice President)		5472 1553
George Broadway (Secretary)	georgebroadway@bigpond.com	5472 2513

Nigel Harland (Treasurer)	5474 8246	Rita Mills	5472 4553
Chris Morris	0418 996 289	Richard Piesse	0448 572 867
Debbie Worland	5472 2474	Noel Young (Editor)	5472 1345

[email newsletter material to: noelyoung@aapt.net.au]

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc. PO Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.
Inc #A0003010B